

From *Useful Toil. Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s*. Edited by John Burnett. New York; Routledge. 1974.

Pages 106-115

Winifred Griffiths

shop assistant (From One Woman's Story, unpublished autobiography.)*

Winifred Griffiths was born in 1895 at Overton, near Basingstoke, Hampshire. Her father worked at a local paper-mill for 30s. a week, was a Methodist lay preacher and brought up his family in a strong puritanical tradition. Winifred left the local church elementary school at fourteen, having been top of her class; the High School at Basingstoke was considered, but rejected on grounds of cost. Her first work was at Burberry's gaberdine factory as an apprentice at 3s. a week, plus 2s. 6d. for rail-travel, which she left for work with a ready-made tailoring firm (6-1/2d. for all the stitching in a lined suit jacket). From here, she went into domestic service as a house-maid at East Oakley House for four happy years and, after the outbreak of the First World War, became a grocery assistant in a Co-operative Stores in order to release men for military service. During the war she met and married Jim Griffiths, then a Welsh miner, who was to have a spectacular career in the Labour Party as Party Agent for Llanelly (1922), President of the South Wales Miners Federation (1934), M.P. for Llanelly (1936), Minister of National Insurance (1945), Colonial Secretary (1950) and Secretary of State for Wales (1964). During these later years Winifred Griffiths was herself active in local politics and in social work. The following extract from her unpublished autobiography describes her experiences in shop-work during the first war.

I become a socialist

In May 1914 I had my nineteenth birthday. I had spent three years at East Oakley House and life still went on in a fairly pleasant way. One day I was glancing through a magazine which had been left around the house when I chanced to read a short article by an economist which I shall always remember. It caused a profound change in my thinking about life. I had never met a socialist and yet this short article was to make a socialist of me. The article gave as the author's opinion that the world should and could be organized so that every able-bodied person did a fair share of useful work and that everybody - children, the aged and the disabled included — should have a fair share of the necessities of life and of the results of human labour. In other words the rule should be 'From each according to his ability, and to each according to his need.' The writer also gave as his opinion that a great many people worked very hard at tasks that were unnecessary and did not contribute to the common good, instancing those who worked to provide luxuries for the rich, while the poor were in dire need.

The impact on me of this article was something akin to a religious conversion. It changed my thinking about life so completely that I no longer felt the urge of personal ambition. Henceforth I had a guiding light which gave life a new meaning. I imagined a society in which men and women worked together gladly to provide all that was needed to banish poverty and distress, and equally gladly went without luxuries and services they had been used to, in order to further the common good. It seemed very important to me that I should bring my own life as far as possible into line with this ideal. I suddenly saw my present occupation as a useless one - doing things for people that they could quite well do for themselves and helping them to sustain a standard of life completely unjustified while so

much poverty existed. For the moment I could see no way out, but the way out was to come more quickly than I expected and that through the terrible calamity of world war.

The outbreak of war

Increasingly as the days of that summer of 1914 wore on I noticed a certain unease in the bearing of my employers. Dr. Scott especially showed signs of anxiety and sometimes of agitation. Nellie the cook heard from a relative in the Army of a rumour that was going the rounds that there might be a war, I recollected something I had read about the Germans building a Navy more powerful than ours. Then came the news that members of a distant royal family had been shot somewhere in Europe, and talk about the Triple Alliance and treaties and Russia. Early in August suddenly the tension snapped — we were at war with Germany.

In those far-off days of 1914 - long before the coming of radio – our only means of getting news was through the papers and by word of mouth. Even in our large house there was no telephone and Dr Scott began to make it a practice to visit the post office at least once a day to get the news from London. When the papers were delivered at the house in the morning we all made a bee-line for them in order to scan the headlines before Dr Scott came down and carried them off to his study. During these first months I had no doubt that our country was in the right. We heard of the invasion of Belgium followed by atrocity stories and soon our picture of the enemy was of people less than human. We heard of the call-up of Reservists, and some middle-aged rather untidy soldiers appeared in the locality - whose duty was to 'guard the bridges' over the railway. At first I could not understand who they were supposed to guard them against, but soon I realized that there was widespread suspicion that there might be spies and saboteurs in our midst. . .

In the meantime the war was changing people's lives. There was a great deal of talk about 'jobs of national importance' for women as well as men. Surely soon *my* chance would come. One day Mrs. Scott spoke to me, letting me know that she knew how I was feeling. She told me that the manager of the Co-operative Stores in Basingstoke was on the lookout for young women to train to take the places of grocery assistants who were joining the Forces. She was prepared to give me a very good reference if I would like to apply. I accepted her offer with alacrity and in due course was taken on in the grocery department of the Cooperative Stores.

Thus I left my job at East Oakley House which I had held for four pleasant years. In the end I felt sorrow at leaving both the family and the staff and especially did I regret leaving my little room in the tower. I went into lodgings in town where I shared a room and bed with another girl, paying 12s. 6d. a week for board and lodging. My mother did my washing, for which I gave her 1s. per week. My wage was £1 so I was left with 6s. 6d. to cover everything else including running my bicycle. The landlady was kindly and the food adequate though, of course, not at all like we had at East Oakley House.

I found on my arrival at the Co-op that I was not expected to serve in the shop right away but was to have some time to get used to the variety of goods and the prices. During this period I worked in what was called 'Dispatch'. This was a room behind the shop in which orders were put up. In charge of this room was a little man with a fair moustache. He was not at all formidable as a 'boss', but was quiet and firm and slightly humorous and organized the work very well. The first job I was put to do was weighing sugar. Sacks of sugar were stored in a loft over Dispatch. This sugar was tipped down a chute to a bench below. It was my job to

stand all day by this bench opening bags, filling sugar into them with a scoop and weighing them in one, two, three and four pounds. As a variation I sometimes switched over to lump sugar and when sufficient sugar had been done soda was sent down the chute. Soda was a commodity bought by most housewives before the advent of soap powders. After a few days at this rather monotonous task I was allowed to help with putting up orders. A very large number of these orders were from country customers. These were collected in late afternoon by the carriers who plied between villages and town.

Friday evening was a busy time in the shop, as many members came then to collect groceries and to pay bills. As bad luck would have it I was sent down for the first time to help on the grocery counter on a Friday evening. I was so bewildered that I am afraid I made a fine mess of things. I had to take payment of bills and the method of receipting had not been explained to me. When trying to serve customers I did not know where things were kept, nor yet had I memorized all the prices. I had not acquired the knack of making tidy packets for goods like dried fruit, rice and tapioca, and numerous others which were kept loose in drawers and had to be weighed as needed. To crown all, most customers expected their goods to be done up in a large paper parcel.

It seems now at this time, when all goods are packeted, and self-service is the order of the day, almost incredible the amount of work involved in serving just one customer under the old conditions. We sold some goods for which there was no room in the shop, such things as potatoes, corn for chickens, barley meal, bran and other animal feeding-stuffs which had to be measured in pint, quart or gallon measures and packed in paper bags. Another article was common salt, which came to the shop in long thick bars, from which we had to cut a thick slice to be sold for 1-1/2d. Yet another commodity was a long bar of household soap which might be bought whole or in halves or quarters and, for a change from solids, there was draught vinegar, to be drawn off into a measure and transferred to customer's own bottle or jug. All these goods and others too were stored in rooms behind the shop and had to be fetched and weighed or measured as needed. The shop assistant's job was not a light one in those days, neither was it a clean one. So many things to weigh and so much to fetch and carry played havoc with our hands and with our overalls. We had a little retreat where we could wash our hands, in cold water, but too many trips to 'Scarborough', as it came to be called, were apt to be frowned upon. So we just wiped our hands on our overalls — and that was that! I soon learned to be wary of 'Committee men' who sometimes appeared without warning, and were suspected by the employees of 'snooping'. At the back of the grocery premises was a baker's where not only bread but confectionery was made. One of our shop windows was given over to a display of cakes which could be bought at the provision counter. In course of time I was given the job of dressing this window and I found it a pleasant interlude.

Just after I was taken on at the Co-op two other women also made a start. Both had come long distances, one from Somerset and the other from Yorkshire. Jennie, the Yorkshire lass, was soon the life and soul of the place. In no time she became, without doubt, the most popular member of staff. She was good-looking, vivacious, cheerful and kind. Obviously life was a great adventure: exciting things were always happening. Life's little incidents took on a magical quality when Jennie recounted them. No one could be cross or gloomy when she was around. I was thrilled when she asked me to come out with her to an evening class, or to the cinema on our half-day, or to church or a walk on Sunday. The Co-op had found 'digs' for her but the food was in short supply and soon she was looking for another place to stay. An elderly woman, who lived just opposite the shop, offered her a room. She found on going to visit Mrs Diddums that there was really place for two, and that two sharing would pay less. Jennie asked me if I would like to join her. We would share a room and have all our meals provided for 10s. a week each, on condition that we gave a hand with the housework. So we clinched the deal and moved in ...

At the shop we were always busy for there never seemed to be a complete staff. Men left to join up and as yet the management could not imagine they could get along with women only. In years prior to the war recruits to the grocery and provision trade had been required to serve several years' apprenticeship and afterwards a long period as ordinary assistants before they could become 'first hand', that is to be in charge of either the grocery or provision counter. Hence the Co-op tried whenever possible to replace the men who left for the army by other men. One day there appeared a young Welshman, who obviously knew his job very well, although this was the first post he had ever taken outside his native Wales. He was a pleasant bright-eyed little fellow in his early twenties who soon became popular with the staff. I discovered in conversation with him that he had his serious side and he had thought quite deeply about life and that he was a socialist. I was quite thrilled to meet a real live socialist, for I had known, in a sense, that I was one ever since I read the economist's article that had so affected me when I was at East Oakley. Now I was to be persuaded of wider implications of socialist thought. Up until now I had been a loyal supporter of the war effort, only wishing I could play a more useful part in helping the country. But now under the influence of this young Welshman, I was to revise my ideas. He contended that the ghastly war was the outcome of the capitalist system and that socialists ought to resist it. Of course it took time for me to be wholly convinced, but Edgar lent me books and pamphlets to read, and gradually I came round to thinking he was right.

Edgar soon joined the crowd of us from the shop who went together to the cinema on Thursday evenings and sometimes on other little outings. The Women's Co-operative Guild was very good to the staff in arranging little farewell parties for the boys who left to join the Army. Daisy, the girl from Somerset, was in digs with a girl called Dolly, who worked in a rather high-class grocery store in town. She would bring Dolly along with her to our outings. In this way Edgar met Dolly and they became very friendly and soon they were as good as engaged.

Looking back it seems as if we were all there together for a long time, but in reality it was only a very short period. Change was in the air, first one left, then another. Conscription was now in force and all the youngsters had to go in turn. Edgar had his calling-up papers and had to go back to Wales. He had at first some thoughts of resistance as a so-called C.O. but it did not come off. I think Dolly had not developed any understanding of that point of view, and her attitude was probably the deciding factor. Anyhow he joined the Army. Meanwhile in the shop still more changes. Suddenly we heard the manager was leaving, not for the Army or anything like that, but to take on a business of his own in a little town some few miles away. Worse was to come. He persuaded Jennie and Daisy to leave and to take jobs with him at his new shop. This to me was a great shock. To lose Jennie was to lose the last bit of sunshine from our little circle. I really felt quite dejected. Now some of Mrs Diddums's family were coming home and she needed my room, so I decided to approach Dolly and see if I might join her in place of Daisy. Soon this was fixed up and Dolly and I became room-mates and pals. Then one day I was surprised to receive a letter and a parcel of books from Wales, from a young man who it appeared was a close friend of Edgar. This young man was a miner and an active socialist and he signed himself 'Yours in the cause, J. Griffiths'. Thus through the pages of a letter and the loan of some books I met the man who was to be my husband. From then onward we corresponded regularly, expressing in our letters our ideas and ideals about the world and its problems. It seemed that we had a good deal in common. Later in the year Dolly had an invitation to come down to Wales when Edgar had

leave from the Army, and I received an invitation from J. Griffiths to come down with her and meet the socialist group to which both he and Edgar belonged.

All my life had been spent in Hampshire in rural and semi-rural surroundings. I knew nothing of the scars that mining and heavy industry could make on nature's fair face. So from that point of view this first visit to Wales was quite an experience. I shall never forget the impression of desolation I had when passing through Landore, the district outside Swansea which had been blasted and scarred by industry and left denuded of trees and green things - an area which nature seemed to have abandoned and where even weeds would not grow. Then on to the mining valley which was our destination. Here was a little town in a valley which was pleasant and green in spite of several collieries and accompanying slag heaps. Here we were to experience our first contacts with the Welsh way of life. We learned about the hard work and the danger of the pits, of the dirt that was brought back to the homes, here miners' wives and daughters waged an incessant war on coal dust and grime, keeping tremendous fires burning to boil hot water for baths, to dry pit clothes and to cook meals. At that time there were few homes with baths, the tub in front of the fire was the usual thing. Then there were the chapels, still well attended in those days, when a good preacher was a great man in the community, and the singing in the chapels and the eisteddfods connected with them formed an important part of the social life.

We paid a visit to the socialist club - The White House - and met the comrades there. I was thrilled and thought I was getting near to the heart of things that mattered. Near the end of our visit, after Edgar had returned to the Army, Jim and I came to an understanding as to how we felt towards each other. From then on we considered it an engagement, though it was not formalized with a ring - as we did not believe in such conventional arrangements!

I become a 'first hand' on provisions but give it up to go to live in Wales

And so, for Dolly and me, an end to our holiday adventure in Wales, and a return to work. For me there was no longer much joy in work. Almost all the staff from the manager down had changed, and I came to the conclusion I also would seek a change. There was a grocery and provision business in town called Walkers Stores which was advertising for a girl to learn the work of the provision counter. I applied and got the job. There were two men, the first and second provision hands, on the counter and I was to assist them and learn the job so that I could take the place of the second hand when he would be leaving to join up. I had to keep the shelves filled up with stock of tinned and bottled goods; I had to weigh up lard and margarine in pounds and half pounds, I learned the knack of patting up butter on a stone slab with pats kept in a bucket of cold water, and of cutting up fifty-six-pound cheeses into sections easy to handle; and I had to acquire the skill to cut up sides of bacon into different parts to be sold at differing prices. Soon the second hand left and I officially took his place. By now my immediate boss, the first hand, was the only male left in the stores, except the manager and the warehouseman. Before long I learned to my consternation that he also was due to join up. When he eventually left, the manager took it for granted that I should step into his place. So after only two or three months of training, as against several years that the old-time apprentice would have had, I found myself in charge of the provision side in a very busy stores, where we sold thirty sides of bacon a week when we could get them and as many cooked hams, as well as the whole range of other provisions. To help me I had as second hand a cheerful hard-working girl who had had some

experience in other stores. The shop opened every morning at 9 o'clock and closed at 7 P.M. on the first three days of the week, at one o'clock on Thursdays, 8 P.M. on Fridays and 9 P.M. on Saturdays. We had an hour for lunch and twenty minutes for tea but often worked for some time after the shop closed. We had a till on our counter and took the cash ourselves. It was of course before the time of automatic reckoning-machines so we had to enter each amount as it was paid in. When we had finished taking money the roll had to be removed and the items totaled up. If they did not correspond with the contents of the till we had to try and try again to get the total right. I remember an occasion when there was a great deal of fuss and some veiled accusations, not on our counter, but on the grocery, where five girls were serving. It was found that they were 10s. short. Each went over the roll in turn to try to find where the error was, but without success. It threw everyone who used the till under suspicion . . .

With wounded Canadian soldiers around, with train-loads of wounded passing through the railway station, and with films of the war, with its mud and slaughter, being shown in the cinema, the terrible nature of this conflict was brought home to us. It had a very depressing effect and hung all the time, like a cloud, in the background of one's mind. By now I was convinced that it had come about as a result of the 'capitalist system' under which we lived, and now to have something on which to pin the blame seemed to ease the burden a little. Jim wrote to me regularly and I answered every letter. We poured out our protests about the war, and the condition of the world around us and about the way people were oppressed. We professed our firm belief in socialism as the shining light which would guide mankind to peace and happiness - 'When the war drums throb no longer and the battle flags are furled, in the Parliament of man the Federation of the World.' Such was our faith in socialism and our belief in the essential goodness of human nature that we were convinced that after the war people must turn to socialism, and then 'all would be better than well'.

As for our own plans we had thought in terms of a two-year engagement. However it was quite a strain living so far from each other and the life I led was very limiting. I began to think of the possibility of getting a job in Wales so that Jim and I could at least see each other more often. My parents naturally enough did not care for this idea, although Jim had been up to Hampshire on a visit and they had been won over to accepting him as a desirable son-in-law. The snag was of course that to them, at that point of time, south-west Wales was a great distance away. I had always lived near home, had visited them often and been on call if my mother had fallen ill. However I was determined, and in the event went off to Wales and found myself a job in the Co-op in Llanelly, a town not many miles from the mining village where Jim lived.

I found digs with a youngish married couple who lived in a substantial house in a road which consisted of about a hundred terraced houses, all as like as postage stamps. There was no front garden, one stepped out of the front door straight on to the pavement. I had fondly hoped that there might be a bathroom, but alas the only water tap was on a standpipe in the scullery, and the water-closet was at the end of the tiny garden. However I was kindly treated and made to feel one of the family. I had a comfortable bed and there was always a good fire in the living room. The house was very well furnished according to the ideas of the period. The kitchen fireplace was surrounded by quantities of brass which looked wonderful when shining brightly but needed to be cleaned at least once a week, while the Welsh dresser of the open type was covered in china, which being exposed to the dust from the fireplace, had to be washed frequently. There

was a small middle room, furnished with table, chairs and a small organ, and this was often used to sit in. The front parlour was very grand with a wonderful suite of furniture, which looked very comfortable but was never used.

The branch of the Co-op at which I worked was in the Station Road, a gloomy and depressing road with small shabby shops, and at the bottom before one reached the railway station were two tin-works, one on either side of the road. Dust and grime from these works spread all over the immediate neighbourhood. This general environment of dust, grime and shabbiness seemed to have had a bad effect on those responsible for running the Co-operative Stores in the town and more especially this particular branch.

When I first started at the shop I really thought I must be dreaming. I could hardly believe it was possible to carry on a business in such a slipshod and slovenly fashion. The people I had to work with were pleasant and friendly, but my liking for them could not obscure the fact that they just had no idea how to run a shop, let alone how to handle food with the most elementary care for hygiene. There was no organization of the work. Fittings were only filled with goods if someone felt like doing the job. Otherwise, when serving, we must fetch all we needed from the warehouse behind the shop. The window dressings were never changed and the only concession to a provision counter was a marble slab, hidden behind a mound of tins and equipped with just a knife for cutting up either bacon or fats. I wondered how I could ever manage to work in such a place. However I got used to it in time, and tried to make the best of a bad job . . .

A great many of the Co-op members were the wives of steel- and tin-plate-workers. When I heard stories of the large earnings many were receiving, albeit for very hard work, I did feel that as good trade unionists and co-operators they should have seen that we were paid more than a pittance for the long hours we put in at the shop. And a pittance I certainly thought it was. Twenty-seven shillings per week was not much to live on when prices were rising. I paid 7s. per week for my lodgings and bought my own food, and I must perforce save some money if only to get home for a holiday. I also must save to get married some time in the future. I therefore cut my eating down to three simple meals a day, cutting out supper entirely. It took a bit of doing as I was young and working hard and often felt hungry. One of the worst things was not being able to afford fruit. I soon came to realize that very few other shop girls in the town had to live on the small money they earned. Most lived at home and their earnings were mainly for clothes and pocket money. However the monotony of my rather impecunious life was relieved once a fortnight when I was able to visit Ammanford. Jim had been active in politics since he was a lad in his teens. He had become the first secretary of the newly formed Trades and Labour Council for the Ammanford district. This entailed frequent visits to Llanelly. Meetings he attended were held there on Saturdays. Afterwards he would meet me at 9 o'clock when I finished work at the shop. We then had just time to catch the last train up the valley. Owing to wartime restrictions this train only went as far as Pontardulais leaving the last five miles of our journey to be made on foot, except when we could 'cadge' a lift in the guard's van of a goods train. In Ammanford I always stayed with our good friend Mrs Jenkins who lived in the same road as Jim and his family. Sometimes on Sunday morning we would attend the English church. In the afternoon we would roam the mountains or the countryside, and in the evening there was the Workers Forum, the socialist debating society, which Jim and others had got going in 'The White House'. In Ammanford I made acquaintance with Jim's relatives who were always very kind to me, though I

now realize that they were probably concerned as to what kind of wife I might make for Jim with my different background and, perhaps, rather unconventional ideas.

I enjoyed these visits, but I found my life in Llanelly and especially my job, increasingly frustrating. Jim and I began to discuss the possibility of getting married in the autumn — we should by then have completed the two years 'engagement'. Our difficulty was money. It was not easy to save and I must at least have a new suit to be married in and there would be fares to travel home for the wedding, and a few other expenses, however simple the ceremony. Jim had no savings to speak of, although like me he was now trying to put something by. Before meeting me he had never felt any great interest in money matters. Like a good Welsh son, at that time, he handed over his pay to his mother. She not only kept him, but bought all his clothes, and he received back from her just pocket money. Most of this went on books and socialism! However we came to the conclusion that we could just about get together enough money to marry in October — and so we did . . .